DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 116 238 CS 202 442

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TITLE The Student-Centered Freshman Composition Course: A Rationale and Model.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the New York State English Council (25th, Buffalo, October 9-11, 1975); Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from FDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; *College Freshmen; *Composition (Literary); Course Content; *Course Descriptions; English Instruction; Higher Education; *Student Centered Curriculum; *Teaching Models

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to briefly describe what student-centeredness means and how it differs from more traditional modes of teaching-learning, and then to exemplify how the student-centered approach might work in a freshman composition course. Following a statement of objectives for a student-centered composition course is a discussion of the kinds of activities that were used in a student-centered composition course at the State University College at Fredonia, New York. (RB)

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NYSEC Conference
October 11, 1975

ED116238

THE STUDENT-CENTERED FRESHMAN COMPOSITION COURSE: A RATIONALE AND MODEL

Although the title of this paper implies that there is *one* kind of course known as student-centered, such is not the case. It is my purpose, here, to briefly describe what student-centeredness means and how it differs from more traditional modes of teaching-learning, and then to exemplify how student-centered approach might work in a freshman composition course.

I remember all too well the time a graduate student asked me to explain the concept of student-centeredness. I began my answer by saying, "Quite simply, student centeredness is . . . ."; about twenty minutes later I realized that it was not at all simple, and I was thoroughly confusing my students with qualification after qualification. Consequently, at the risk of over simplifying, I would like to begin with the following definition of student-centeredness:

> **student-centeredness means that the activities, materials, and processes involved in the learning experience derive from and focus on the personal growth of the students in the classroom. It means that the students are, in fact, the subject matter of the class: that their experiences, ideas, confusions, hates and loves are the topics that will provide the focal points for the activities designed by the teacher. It does not mean that the teacher abrogates responsibility for planning, coordinating, and sequencing activities or for giving honest, straightforward evaluative feedback.**

The objectives of a student-centered composition course are as follows:

1. promote the personal growth and mental health of the students by encouraging the free and open exchange of ideas about many different subjects, by encouraging students to investigate their own private world of self, and by respecting their curiosity and attempts at communication as attempts to give parts of themselves to their readership;
2. help the students gain confidence in their ability to express themselves orally;
3. improve their ability to communicate effectively, interestingly, and beautifully in writing;
4. encourage them to establish a "personal voice" in all their writing and to avoid a dull, monotonous style of writing;
5. help the students investigate the relationships between oral composition, written composition, visual composition, and other forms of expression like film, collage, music, dance, and sculpture;
6. give the student a positive experience with writing, literature, and other art forms so that he will enjoy the universe of discourse and continue to read, write, talk and listen enthusiastically and effectively long after the course has ended; and finally,
7. help the students view language as a means of organizing and expressing their experiences and perceptions in an attempt to better understand themselves and the world around them.

Although these seven objectives may seem to ignore certain time-honored elements of a writing course such as punctuation, usage, syntax, and rhetorical approaches, this is not the case. Inasmuch as a student-centered approach focuses on the students and their world, it is more concerned with *what is communicated* than it is with *how* something is communicated. But this should not be mistaken as a lack of concern for the "mechanics" of writing. It is, rather, a setting of priorities. The content of the students' communications comes first; the polishing of that content comes second.

This last paragraph deserves elaboration because it contains one of the major differences between a student-centered approach and other more common approaches. I know of few teachers of writing who do not care about the content of their students' papers. But most approaches to student writing involve a preliminary emphasis on forms or rhetorical techniques (exposition, description, persuasion) or an emphasis

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on mechanics (usage, punctuation) or an emphasis on building blocks (first words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs--introductions, bodies, conclusions, and then, *voila*, the essay). Teachers of such courses often find themselves saying or writing to their students: "What you have to say here is interesting, and I enjoyed reading your paper, *but* . . . (you have not remained objective, *or* there are too many comma splices and incomplete sentences, *or* your conclusion fails to "wrap things up"). Students in such courses soon get the message (whether intended or not) that it "ain't what you say, but how you say it," and they begin to focus on the peripheral matters of form and style before they have understood and clarified *for themselves* what it is they are trying to say.

A student-centered approach reverses things and places the immediate importance on what it is the student is saying. It assumes that the first stages of the writing process involve the writer in the search for and, hopefully, the discovery of what it is that he is trying to say.[1] This assumption, closely related to the seven "objectives" listed above, forms the rationale for employing a student-centered approach. That is, the student is searching for and attempting to articulate his relationship with himself and his world; discovery is at the center of that search; and the teacher is an important part of this discovery process.

Language, then, becomes the central means for the student to find out what it is he is thinking. As he talks in class and shares his perceptions with his fellow students, he is forced to modify, qualify, expand, exemplify, clarify, and polish his ideas. As he writes them down on paper, he gains the opportunity to see what he thinks; because it will hold still on paper, he can analyze his own discoveries and change them appropriately whenever he deems it necessary.

So much for generalizations about student-centeredness. Some specifics will more clearly illustrate what I have in mind. But once again the caution: this is a model, a skeleton, containing within it the possibility and the need for infinite variations created in concert by the teacher and the students. It is not *the* way; it is simply *a* way. To follow my suggestions is not to participate in the solution to teaching composition, it is to become involved in a process and a search for ways to help students learn about themselves and their world, and to articulate what it is they find. To state the obvious, no course, whether it be composition or literature (or physics or math?) can be taught the same way two different semesters. When the students change, the course changes. To do otherwise is to be caught in the trap James Moffett describes when he says that each September we open our school doors only to see the wrong students walk through them.

My own search for a successful composition course has led me down many corridors: some provided successful journeys for me and my students; others were useless. And because I often change my mind about the specifics of what I and my students should do in a freshman composition course, I reserve the right, like Emerson, to contradict myself.

At the very beginning of the course I try to dispel the importance of grades in the course by telling the students that, first and foremost, I want them to make a sincere attempt to experiment with several kinds of media (writing having a first priority) and that, if they do all the work, participate in class discussions and activities, and try to write and say things they think are worth saying, they will receive no less than a *B*. They understand that they will receive no grades on individual papers (unless they specifically request grades, and in seven years I've had only one student do so), but that their progress and the quality of their work will be discussed in three individual conferences held throughout the term. They also understand that all their writing is to be typed on ditto masters and they are to run off enough copies to distribute to the entire class (an announcement that usually causes real consternation at first but that ceases to be an issue after the second or third paper). And finishing the general requirements, they are told that they are to keep private journals that will be collected approximately three times during the sixteen weeks of the course. They understand that these journals are to contain whatever it is they wish to write about--dreams, ideas, jokes, stories, character sketches, confusions, letters, etc.--and that they should try to write in their journals at least three times every week. I also explain that I will not "mark" their journals or point out

[1]Though some teachers prefer to call this discovery stage a *pre*-writing activity, I prefer to associate it with the writing process and to see it as an integral part of that process. If it is viewed as an integral part of the writing process, both student and teacher will avoid being tempted to treat it as some trivial (or fun, or silly, or dissociated) part of the process.

"errors," but that my major reason for assigning the journals is to give them the opportunity to freely experiment with many kinds of writing and to jot down ideas or incidents that might be used later for public writing.[2]

The first activities in the course focus on getting the students to loosen up, to know one another, and to feel free to express themselves openly, both orally and in writing. One activity I often use is to ask the students to bring in a "wordless poem": this involves each of them bringing in a single object (photograph, good luck charm, guitar, piece of wood) that means a great deal to them and that represents them in some significant way. At the beginning of the "wordless poem" class, each student places his object on top of his or her desk, and the students walk around looking at, feeling, examining, tasting, listening to, the poems. After everyone has had an opportunity to see and think about all the objects, the students are given the opportunity to talk about their own and other student's objects. (Because this takes place very early in the course and the students are sometimes a little hesitant about talking, the teacher will probably have to help them talk about the objects by asking leading questions or helping the class to focus on certain objects.) A major objective in this activity is to get the students telling one another stories about the object: where or when they got it; why it is important; how it symbolizes an important part of their lives.

If time permits, I often have the students do an in-class free association at this point, suggesting that they attempt to focus on one of the objects (preferably not their own) and that they write whatever comes into their heads as they look at and think about the object. These free associations are generally done in their journals. The formal writing assignments growing out of this activity can be as many as the teacher and the students can create: a student might write a piece focusing on his own or someone else's poem in which he/she attempts to describe what kind of things that person must value, using the object as an example; other students might write papers describing a given object; they might describe how they were affected by the sharing of "wordless poems"; they might write short stories about one of the objects; or they might write about how a given object did or did not fit their first impression of the person who brought it in. This open-ended writing assignment gives them the opportunity to spend some time thinking about the people in the class and what was said, and to respond in a public-personal way through writing. The papers generally result in a second discussion about the objects and the students' writing, as students ask, "do you really think I'm like that?" or "Is that what you thought I meant by the wordless poem?"

It's probably obvious by now that (when it works) the wordless poem works effectively and immediately to bring the students together through a common sharing experience, that it gives the teacher an opportunity to find out a great deal about his students and their interests, and it offers a concrete beginning point for their writing. Of course there are countless other activities that will accomplish the same ends: some teachers begin with fairly straightforward sensitivity exercises like blind walks (though I prefer to avoid these kinds of activities because I've never felt particularly comfortable with them); on occasion I have instructed the students to make collages that concretely reflect their values or their personalities (though in recent years I have found that many of my students have been "collaged" to death and that they resent this assignment); and Jeffrey Schrank's book *Teaching Human Beings: 101 Subversive Activities for the Classroom* (Beacon Press) offers many other possibilities for teachers who need to give their imaginations a jolt.

To some extent the teacher has to make judgments about what the students will be comfortable with and what the teacher will be comfortable with. And in the end, it is not the particular activity that matters as much as the processes in which the students engage. It is essential that they immediately begin to see the classroom as a place where important human interactions will take place, that they understand that they will control these activities, and that they write about these experiences. Furthermore, these opening activities are more than simple "icebreakers" inasmuch as they are designed to get the students writing about themselves and questioning their own ideas and values through language.

After this opening set of activities I often move to a mixture of stories and/or poems that deal with the students' values and desires. I have had particular success with "The Third Tree From The Corner" by T. H. White and "A Dream Deferred" by Langston Hughes at this stage in the course. The classroom discussions revolve around the students talking about what it is they want out of life, what material possessions they

[2]It is probably unnecessary to say that most of these students have heard a lot of this liberal "teacher talk" before, and they do not believe much of it that first day. I find that it generally takes about three weeks and one reading of the journals to convince them that I mean what I say. Though some of the students continue to believe that I will come to my senses at the end of the course, get "tough," and hand out plenty of *D*'s.

deem particularly important beyond the absolute necessities (what are the absolute necessities?), what they hope to be doing ten years from now, what they will do if their dreams and hopes for the future are defeated, etc. As always these discussions lead to writing and further discussion when the writing is distributed to the class.

From this point on (approximately three to four weeks have passed by now), I am never sure what will be happening in the course. Of course I plan what will happen, but in an attempt to teach the students who are in the class and not the students whom I taught last year, I generally find I have to revise radically whatever it is I had planned. Perhaps it is best to simply say that I continue throughout the rest of the semester with a relatively consistent pattern: a reading coupled with an activity followed by the students writing followed by class discussions of that writing.[3] Again, individual teachers must decide for themselves what readings and activities will work best with their students, but the following examples will give some idea of the kinds of things I have tried with my students, generally with some success.

Improvisations:

I have had much success (and some glaring failures) with classroom improvisations ranging from pantomime to psychodrama to sociodrama and resulting in the writing of scripts, character sketches, and criticisms of the whole idea of having students do improvisations (see my article in *English Record*, Spring, 1975 for a complete discussion of improvisations in the classroom).

Media:

Split the students into three groups: one group represents the decision makers at ABC, one at NBC, and the other at CBS. Face them with any of a variety of problems which they must come to agreement on within their group and which decision they must each explain in writing. For example: although your group is opposed to censorship, there is increasing evidence that one of the network's most successful shows, a show filled with violence, is resulting in an upsurge of crime in the streets. What do you do?

Or, one of the network's reporters has broken a story that clearly implicates the president of the United States in a plot to create a military dictatorship in this country with himself at the head: does the network report it on their six o'clock news, call the CIA or the FBI, commit suicide? Again, each student must explain his/her final decision in writing.

The writing that comes out of these groups can then be used as a focal point for a debate between the "network bosses," a debate out of which revised positions and arguments might then be written.

I have had some of my greatest success by having students work in the area of advertising and commercials, and I often use these activities to ask students to work with mixed media, not necessarily ignoring print, but seriously considering other things like mock-ups of ads, improvisations in which they "sell" some item to the class, and occasionally, script writing and eventually videotaping the commercials. Of course, the "network bosses" activity I mentioned above can also be employed here by having the bosses make decisions about what kind of ads are appropriate, etc.[4]

Interviews:

Although many of my students find this a somewhat threatening activity, they generally respond to it positively and often write very interesting pieces as a result of it. I ask them to interview someone in the community who owns a business or is engaged in an activity that the student finds interesting or wants to know more about. After giving them standard directions about how to prepare for an interview and an opportunity to ask questions and voice their fears about approaching a stranger for an interview, I turn them loose. The result is usually an array of pieces about what it's like to be a grape farmer in Western New York, how a bartender deals with drunks, what a local policeman's attitude is toward drug offenders, etc.

Again, there are countless other possibilities for interesting activities in which students can engage and from which they can gain valuable experience and information for writing. Certainly, traditional activities based on readings or films and discussions of the films are valuable and can almost always be worked into a given activity if the teacher wishes to do so. In addition, other relatively common activities I have had success with are as follows:

[3]Note that the reading, discussion, writing format is a time-honored one. What makes it different (and far more effective) is the addition of specific activities designed to get the students thinking and acting in terms of their experiences.

[4]See Stephen Judy. *Explorations in the Teaching of English*. Dodd-Mead, 1974.

Objective Observation:

Take the students to a local art gallery and have them choose paintings they wish to describe in writing. Their job is to describe the painting or sculpture with such precision that another student, using their paper, can go into the gallery and find the work of art described. Of course, this activity is most fun and most useful if the students are asked to concentrate on abstract works of art that will force them to use mixtures of literal and figurative language.

Or, sit in one place for one hour and write everything you see, hear, taste, feel, smell, during that time. Do not reflect on these things; simply try to catalogue them as accurately as you possibly can.

Or, go to an airport or shopping mall and observe one person for about 20 minutes. Write a description of every move the person makes during that time, again avoiding drawing conclusions or making judgments.

Subjective Observation:

Following any of the above observation activities, have the students write subjective papers or short stories about what they observed. What does the abstract work of art "mean"; what story does it depict; what emotions does it invoke?

Sit in the same place you sat in before for your objective piece and write about the things that you remember thinking about as a result of your observations.

Write a short story or character sketch of the person you observed.

Sequence:

I generally try to have the students begin with personal kinds of writing that emphasize the students' "right to say it." These personal pieces have the purpose of giving the students an opportunity to say what they think, state their biases and opinions, and examine the biases and opinions of others. As the course moves forward, I try to get them to begin to move outside of themselves a little and to begin to take account of what other people think and feel, to examine what the common experience might be, and to measure their private truths against the "common truths."

In many ways this second part, getting the students to move out of their private worlds, is always the most difficult part for me and for them. They generally have little trouble writing about their own ideas and opinions, but they often find themselves almost unable to deal with larger issues and their relationships to those issues. What I often find happening is a reversion to what Ken Macrorie's student called ENGFISH: suddenly the powerful personal statements disappear and the "teacher-oriented" gobbledygook reasserts itself. The only real success I have had in dealing with this problem has been through the extensive use of personal conferences in which I and an individual student can examine his paper trying to find out first, if he even cares about what he has said, and second why it is that he has hidden his emotional response to the issue. Ultimately I am much less worried about the students' ability to write these sorts of papers than I am about their ability to think through issues and find their own way within those issues. I confess a nagging feeling that, at best, I only sometimes succeed with this part of the course.

Mid-Term:

Approximately two weeks before the middle of the semester, I call off classes and give the students the class time plus whatever time they can manage to work on an extended piece of writing which is to be handed in, without fail, at the first class meeting following the lay-off. The students are told that they can write anything they wish and employ any forms they wish. I generally suggest the following possibilities along with some general discussion of what these possibilities entail: an extended personal essay in which the writer focuses on three or four major moments in his/her life, organizing and employing images and rhetorical techniques to indicate the growth, changes, contrasts, etc. that exist among the four incidents (or the same kind of extended personal essay in which the writer attempts to show how a relationshp he/she has with someone else has changed over the years); a short story based on personal experience or relationships as explained above; a science-fiction story in which the writer is responsible for reasonable scientific accuracy and enough character development to make the reader care about what is happening; a collection of poetry focusing on a place, person, idea, or feeling that is important to the writer (these are often mixed with prose sections involving description or personal vignettes); argumentative or expository essays focusing on issues or topics of particular interest to the writer; and finally, the traditional research paper.

With the research paper, I generally make it clear that the students should do this kind of paper only if 1) they are particularly interested in a topic, want to find out much more about it, and desire to tell the class about it, 2) they have no idea about how to go about writing such a paper and are fearful that it will affect their performance in other courses, and/or 3) they are involved in a research paper in another course and want help and guidance with it. (My biases will show when I admit my surprise over the fact that several students each semester choose to work on some sort of research paper.)

One of the most important aspects of the mid term project is that it involves extensive personal conferences with each of the students as they come in to discuss what it is they want to do, what problems they will encounter, how best go get started, etc. And then later, when they begin to come in with rough drafts of their papers or sections of their papers so that I can give them feedback about how well they are effecting their original objectives and advice about how they might change things or go about things differently to better accomplish their goals. To say the least, such conferences are trying and exhausting because they involve intense and careful readings of each student's paper, immediate feedback, and all the frustration that goes with not always knowing what to tell a writer about his/her writing. I often find myself, particularly with better writers, simply discussing and talking about what it is they have written, probing and asking questions rather than giving clear cut suggestions about revisions. But regardless of the difficulties involved, I am convinced that these kinds of conferences are perhaps one of the single most important elements in writing courses (and perhaps any course). Also, with so much time and effort spent on these mid-term projects, I expect very good work and generally get it. This involved process also helps me to spot those students who, even with extensive personal help, still have difficulties that need to be dealt with in the second half of the semester, just as it serves to point out what most of the students are able to do well and what does not need further coverage.

The Final Project:

I often find that toward the end of the semester, my students are getting very tired of writing. They've been doing a lot of it and they are often ready to try other kinds of things. Consequently, although the final project may be a piece of writing similar to the mid-term or involving a rewrite and expansion of a paper written earlier in the course, the students also have the option of working with other media to produce tape-slide productions, tape compositions, informal (though polished) dramatic productions, and whatever else they can think of. All final projects of this nature are presented in class and usually take up at least the last two weeks of class. It should be noted that this is not the first time in the course the students will have dealt with media other than writing, but it is the point at which they have the most amount of lead time to think about, organize, prepare, and find the necessary equipment to produce their presentations.